

OPINION

Narendra Modi diminished his office by selectively invoking Mahatma Gandhi in Parliament

If Gandhiji were alive today, rather than advocate an Opposition-mukt India, he would have advocated a Hindutva-mukt India.

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PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tirade in Parliament against Opposition parties, the Congress in particular, struck me as the desecration of the temple of Indian democracy. This is for two reasons.

First, the prime minister, who heads a democratically-elected government, should not behave like the party pugilist. He is under oath to be prime minister to the whole of India, and this includes the Opposition parties. It is blatantly dishonest for him to swear by the Constitution to be non-partisan in the discharge of his duties as prime minister, and then to spout partisan venom in Parliament. Modi's predecessor, Manmohan Singh, may have lacked his rhetorical flamboyance and charisma, but he unfailingly upheld the dignity of the office he held.

Modi's party colleagues, who thumped their desks in approval, did him a disservice by egging him on. Obvious and oily signs of appreciation from those around demagogues make them go overboard. I would have expected a vastly experienced and sage parliamentarian like LK Advani to pluck the courage it took to sober Modi down, for I know how much Advani respects parliamentary decorum. It is also astonishing how little the Modi camp cares for how the country at large feels about the way things are. This is despite evident electoral distress

signals emerging from diverse pockets. More are sure to follow. The prime minister's unsavoury parliamentary performance, marking an all-time low in parliamentary propriety, can only swell the rising tide of disenchantment and alarm across India.

Half-truths and lies

Second, I was shocked how facilely Modi misrepresented facts and situations. It suffices for illustrative purposes to consider only his innuendo that, in trying to eradicate the Congress from the political map of India, he is only honouring the wish of the Mahatma.

Among other things Modi **said** in Parliament on February 7 was that the Bharatiya Janata Party was only attempting to fulfill Mahatma Gandhi's dream of a Congress-free India. He said: "I also want Mahatma Gandhi's India, because when the country got freedom, Gandhi had said 'now we don't need the Congress'. Congress-free India is not Modi's idea, it is Gandhi's idea. That's what we want too."

Of course, it is true that Gandhiji would rather have had the Congress – as a nationalist movement based on high ideals – dismantled than suffer its sanctity to be compromised by the corruption that power, he feared, would infect it with. It is also true that Gandhiji's worst fears came true in this regard – the reason why the people of this great democracy, still loyal to the pilgrim path set by the Mahatma, punished the Congress. But Modi should not be too clever by half. The fact that the Indian electorate gave the Congress a merciless drubbing for its alleged venalities only proves that the common man still cares for the ideals that Gandhiji upheld. It is foolish for Modi and his party to assume that the angry voter will not do to them what they did to the Congress for letting them down.

Modi invoked the historical memory of the Mahatma's apprehensions about vested interests overtaking the Congress. In doing so, Modi created the impression that Gandhiji did so only to clear the way for him and his party. Will the prime minister's public posturing of abiding by the will of the Mahatma also inspire him to take a stern, uncompromising stand against the divisive, communal polarisation of India? Will Modi, out of respect for Gandhi, whom he is eager to annex, together with Vallabhbhai Patel, as a partisan legacy, insist that Hindus and Muslim are the two eyes of Mother India? Will he rein in hate brigades and shut out communal motor mouths who feel empowered and licensed under his watch? To selectively invoke Gandhi is perjury against that prophet of Truth, for half-truths are often deadlier than lies.

If Gandhi were alive

The truth, as even Modi knows, is quite contrary to what he would have us believe. If the Mahatma were alive today, Modi would not have been guiding the destiny of India in the first place. The Congress would not have deteriorated in its ideals and allowed itself to be ideologically tainted with aberrations of soft Hindutva. Gandhiji would have been at the forefront of denouncing every aspect of Hindutva advocacies and strategies. He would have, out of sheer necessity, re-invigorated the Congress as a bulwark against the assaults of this fissiparous ideology, which is a taint on the soul of the Vaidic religion. Rather than advocate an Opposition-mukt India, he would have advocated a Hindutva-mukt India.

Gandhiji would have fasted unto death against the fashion of spouting showers of lies and half-truths to the nation, and insisted that the truth, and nothing but the truth, be allowed to prevail in national life. He would have chastised this government for its liaisons with crony capitalists and condemned the monarchs of greed each time a farmer committed suicide, a Dalit got brutalised, or a helpless human being was insulted and terrorised, as a hapless beggar was the other day in Uttar Pradesh for the mere offence of being a Muslim. Gandhiji would have demanded a poverty-mukt, exploitation-mukt, violence-mukt, fear-mukt India, and would not have accepted any compromise in these respects.

It is a pity that Prime Minister Modi believes that words can take the place of deeds. He seems to believe that burning realities of human privation and massive suffering can be pushed back by an iron curtain of rhetoric. It will not take long for the truth to break out that words will evaporate in the heat of popular anger fanned by justifiable indignation at being cheated.

If four years ago, the Congress did all it could to bring the BJP back to power, the time has come, it seems, for Modi's BJP to return the favour. It should worry the BJP that the Modi magic is clearly waning, for that party has nothing else to bank on. The idea that voters can be mesmerised by chanting forever the failures of the Congress is utter folly. Not even a mad man will buy the argument that the BJP can do exactly what the Congress did, and continue to win hearts and minds merely by condemning its adversaries. The Congress may be the BJP's enemy. The common man's enemies are different. And they seem to be thriving more under BJP's patronage than they did under the previous dispensation.